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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001691

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: NASSIB LAHOUD ON SHIA SEEKING A NEW
"VETO"; ELECTORAL POLITICS

REF: BEIRUT 1638

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) In a November 25 call on the Ambassador, Minister of State Nassib Lahoud described a Hizballah goal of "rewriting" the Taif Accord to allow the election of the president by popular vote. Until this long-term change is achieved, Lahoud expects the group will continue to demand veto authority over government decisions affecting Lebanon's Shia population. (Currently, the president is elected by the Lebanese Parliament, which is carefully split 50/50 between Muslims and Christians. The implication of a popular vote is that Muslims, thought to be a majority in Lebanon although there is no official data or census, would have a greater say. Further, such a move would give increased power to Shia, thought to be the fastest-growing confessional group in Lebanon). Lahoud said President Sleiman is still formulating plans for an approach to the role of independents in the 2009 election. This could follow a "seat-sharing" formulation by grouping March 14, opposition, and independent candidates on the same electoral list. Sleiman wants former Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammad Safadi included in an independent bloc, according to Lahoud. If March 14 fails to win a majority in the 2009 elections, Mikati could be selected as prime minister, he said. Lahoud assessed Minister of Defense Elias Murr as not firmly in the March 14 camp, despite Saad Hariri's confidence that Murr is indeed allied with him. End summary.

LOOKING FOR A SHIA VETO

¶2. (C) In a November 25 meeting, Minister of State Nassib Lahoud described Hizballah Chief of Research Ali Fayyad's proposal for electing the president by a popular vote. Fayyad presented the proposal at a November 14 conference, organized by the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA), on defense strategy ideas for Lebanon. Fayyad argued that until a popular vote could be enacted, the "consensual aspects" of the Taif Accord should be emphasized. "In practice, veto authority," he clarified. (Note: Taif stipulates that cabinet should adopt decisions by consent, but adds that if consent is impossible, then by vote. End

note.) Lahoud assessed from Fayyad's statements that Hizballah will demand enough seats for a veto in all future cabinets. (Note: Although many Lebanese leaders have mentioned the formation of a national unity government after 2009 parliamentary elections, this is the first explicit mention we have heard of a mandatory veto authority for the Shia. A "Shia veto" will equal a veto for Hizballah, at least until another Shia movement might gain significant momentum to challenge Hizballah's monopoly of the sect. End Note.)

SLEIMAN'S INDEPENDENT BLOC

¶3. (C) Lahoud said Sleiman was "adamant" in his desire to see an independent bloc in the 2009 parliamentary elections. Sleiman, however, envisions the bloc as part of a "seat-sharing" formulation in which leaders would agree, ahead of elections, on a list containing 14 March, opposition, and independent candidates. Using the Metn as an example, Lahoud suggested that there would be a deal under which three seats would go to March 14, three to March 8, and two to the President, if the Armenian Tashnaq party joins with the President. (Note: According to Lahoud, Tashnaq is discussing possible arrangements with the President. End Note.) Sleiman will seek to encourage the formation of these lists through "friendly persuasion," Lahoud noted.

¶4. (C) If the other Metn political powerhouses -- including Defense Minister Elias Murr, his father MP Michel Murr, former President Amine Gemayel, Tashnaq, Lebanese Forces head

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Samir Geagea, and Lahoud -- agree on the seat-sharing formulation, opposition leader Michel Aoun will have no choice but to accept, Lahoud said. Additionally, Lahoud assessed that although Geagea and Gemayel were not yet in the mindset to give up their own seats for the good of a consensus list, they would come around to the idea. Lahoud acknowledged the system was less democratic than would be desirable, but said Sleiman believed it would reduce tensions surrounding elections and increase his ability to reach consensus with MPs and Ministers. Lahoud, who will run in the Metn, said he would be counted as a March 14 seat there.

¶5. (C) Regarding possible independent seats in the north, Lahoud said Sleiman wants two key Sunnis included: former Prime Minister Najib Mikati and Minister of Economy and Trade Mohammad Safadi. Lahoud said Sunni leader Saad Hariri "has no problems" with Mikati and Safadi and trusts Mikati as a "friendly, independent player." In response to the Ambassador's question about what Mikati would want in return for participating in any list, Lahoud said Mikati was pushing for an additional electoral seat, either in Tripoli or a smaller Beirut suburb like Daniyeh. Lahoud noted that Mikati being named as the next prime minister could be a "solution" if March 14 fails to win the majority (i.e. both the current opposition and majority could accept him). However, Lahoud said Hariri as prime minister would be "natural" if March 14 wins the majority, and Hariri probably would insist on the position.

¶6. (C) Discussing other potential independents, Lahoud confirmed Nazem Khoury had officially resigned within the past week from his post of presidential advisor to become eligible to participate in parliamentary elections. According to Lahoud, Khoury opened an electoral office in Jbeil and was seriously considering running there (reftel). Lahoud described Nemat Frem, another potential independent candidate, as "non-confrontational."

¶7. (C) Lahoud said the President was still formulating his plans for electoral lists. Lahoud also assessed Sleiman was "correcting" after coming out too strong in favor of an independent bloc. Lahoud argued that no one in Lebanon knows what the "pulse" of the elections is; Sleiman will wait until

closer to the elections before making any public calls for independent candidates.

"HELP HIM HELP OUR CAUSE"

18. (C) Lahoud assessed that Sleiman agreed with March 14 principles in general and could further the coalition's agenda, even if he avoided referring to the goals specifically as "March 14". Lahoud said Sleiman supported the need to characterize Syria-Lebanon relations as relations between two sovereign states. He understood, according to Lahoud, the need to distance the new relationship from previous cooperation agreements between the two nations. Such distancing is a March 14 platform point, Lahoud pointed out. Lahoud noted a "covert alliance" between March 14 and the President would enable the coalition to encourage Sleiman to work on delineating the border with Syria and other bilateral issues. Lahoud emphasized the importance of March 14 "staying friendly" with independent figures.

MURR NOT FIRMLY WITH HARIRI?

19. (C) Players other than the President may also be waiting to see which way the election tides turn before making firm alliances. According to Lahoud, Hariri was convinced the Murr bloc would side with him in 2009 elections. Lahoud was not convinced. (Note: In a November 21 meeting with the Ambassador, Minister Elias Murr expressed intense frustration at Hariri's lack of political savvy and motivation in cultivating electoral alliances. His criticism and comments that he "could not afford" to lose the elections because of Hariri made Elias Murr seem anything but firmly entrenched in an alliance with Hariri. End note.) Lahoud assessed an independent bloc allied with March 14 made sense for the

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Murrs, as they have good relations with the U.S. and with Hariri. Lahoud argued the Murrs would support a consensus list in the Metn.

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